DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 186 CS 212 806

AUTHOR Benton, Carol L.
TITLE The Impulse toward Comedy in Margaret Atwood's Poetry.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Detroit, MI, April 5-8, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Comedy; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Literary Devices; Literary Styles; *Poetry; Poets; *Reader Text Relationship; *Reading Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Atwood (Margaret); Reading Uses; Text Factors

ABSTRACT

The impulse toward comedy in the poetry of Canadian author Margaret Atwood occurs as a by-product of an interaction between scripted text and performing reader. Reading, then, may be profitably viewed as a rehearsal for both. In the classroom, this stylistic approach to Atwood's poetry can be emphasized over thematic analysis. In her poetry, parentheses act as textually defined cues for comedy. Additionally, the reader specifies the exact voicing for the persona, opening up the text's potential for comic interpretation. Readers may use rate, pitch, stress, and vocal tone to highlight comic attitudes. Many of Atwood's poems allow the possibility of sounding sarcastic, manipulative, condescending, and witty. The implications for Atwood's canon are: (1) that there may be more similarities than initially realized between poetic and narrative texts; (2) that Atwood's poems benefit from comic interpretations; and (3) that a comic rendering of Atwood's poems alters and reshapes the voice of personae. As a result of the enlarged vocal dimension, the reader-text relationship is changed. A rehearsal of comic impulses enlarges Atwood's poetic potential. (Twelve endnotes are included; thirty-eight references are attached.) (Author/SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED332186

CENTRAL STATES COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

1990

7.8 DEBUT PANEL: COMPETITIVE PAPERS

THE IMPULSE TOWARD COMEDY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S POETRY

by

Carol L. Benton

Assistant Professor of Communication

Central Missouri State University

Warrensburg, Missouri 64093

Office: (816) 429-4925

CS212806

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carol Benton

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ABSTRACT

This essay explores comic impulses within the poetry of the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. The impulse toward comedy occurs as a by-product of an interaction between scripted text and performing reader. Reading, then, may be profitably viewed as a rehearsal for both. In Atwood, parentheses act as textually defined cues for comedy. Additionally, a reader specifies the exact voicing for the persona, opening up the text's potential for comic interpretation. In this discussion several possible comic voicings are improvisationally generated and examined.

THE IMPLUSE TOWARD COMEDY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S POETRY

Margaret Atwood has been publishing literature for the past two and a half decades. She began the early sixties publishing poetry, by the end of the decade moving into narrative, and entered the seventies exploring literary criticism.[1] Currently, Atwood enjoys the notoriety of being Canada's premiere author and critic. In all, she is the author of over twenty published texts. Each exhibits her distinctive style and tone of voice. In a review of Atwood's most recent novel, Cat's Eye, she is described as the "high priestess of angst" as most of her previous two dozen texts contain a sense of "allegorical misery."[2] Whether composing an introspective poem or providing narrative for a witty duel between characters, many of her themes include "an eclectic blend of nationalist, feminist, and metaphysical concerns."[3]

Critics of Atwood's canon have been eager to explore such diverse topics as shamanistic influences, gothic imagery, and feminist perspectives.[4] Despite the variety and abundance of such criticism, there have been omissions. Thematic analyses have been emphasized at the expense of more stylistic approaches. To illustrate, while critics have noted comic moments throughout Atwood's short stories and novels, they have overlooked her impulse toward comedy within the poetic texts.[5] Many of Atwood's poems support comic interpretations as viable, alternative ways to construct meaning. In order to examine comic impulses, the present discussion describes, rehearses, and criticizes selected Atwood poems.[6] This article explores the way comic impulses inform the creation of textual meaning.

INTRODUCTION

In Atwood's poems, text and reader come together to establish a comic interpretation. Some texts, through structure and/or persona, may suggest a comic voicing. A reader can accommodate this suggestion by relying on various appropriate vocal qualities to specify themes and motifs. These qualities may

include rate, pitch, volume, stress, and tone of voice to indicate comic moments. These moments, then, accumulate so that Atwood's poems reveal various styles of comedy including sarcasm, parody, irony, cunning and manipulation, wit, self-deprecation, impertinence, and self-mocking. While not all these styles are necessarily funny, comedy often arises when the persona demonstrates these attitudes. For this discussion, comic impulses will be defined as "a poetic moment made incongruous by language, sense imagery, or any other discrepancy between what is expected and what is given."[7] The following elaborates specific textual cues, such as parentheses, as well as readerly responses, such as voicing, which may be heard as providing the foundation for comic interpretations.

PARENTHESES: TEXTUAL CUES FOR COMEDY

Frequently, Atwood depends on parentheses as a means of scripting comic cues into poems. A majority of her poems contain parentheses. Usually, parentheses contain explanatory remarks, qualifying comments, and suggests overt manipulation by the persona. Whether as an aside to her reader or a tossing off of the parenthetical remark, the persona's voice reflects her control of the moment.

The relationship between persona and reader is altered by the use of parentheses. Parenthetical remarks indicate distance and incongruity, such as in "This is a Photograph of Me." In this opening poem from The Circle Game Atwood explores themes of myth, perception, and the nature of reality. Punctuation heightens the irony between what the persona says and how she utters the text. After the title, the persona initiates a game heightened by responding with a comic voice.

> It was taken some time ago.
> At first it seems to be
> a smeared
> print: blurred lines and grey flecks
> blended with the paper;

then as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

The poem is spoken by a cunning, manipulative, and controlling persona who plays a perceptual game of hide-and-seek. Grace says the poem

> challenges our perception immediately, asking us to adjust our sights, to find out where this particular voice is coming from. If we can learn how to do this, the voice promises us that "eventually/ you will be able to see me." The ironic double structure of this poem, its emphasis on seeing and its sharp visual imagery, urges us to rediscover our senses and our relationship with the world.[8]

The title provides entrance to the poem. In the first part of the poem, the persona describes a picture of the scenery and landscape around herself. Like other Atwood poems, I specify the persona as an educated adult female. In this poem, she addresses an internally specified "you" which may be generalized to include all readers of the poem. This choice suggests that all readers may be taken in by the persona. Primarily, the persona's voice is perceived in reference to the objects and scenery around her. It seems as

though the persona has never actually viewed the photo. One instance of this lack of awareness is in the second stanza when the persona appears not to know if it is a balsam or a spruce tree. This is the first occasion that parenthetical remarks are used. The persona may speak in an aside to her reader and sound hesitant. Ironically, while appearing unfamiliar with the photograph, she controls what the reader is allowed to see. She points out what she chooses. During the first half of the poem, the persona may sound innocent, tentative, and coy. It is important that the persona's voice be believable and above suspicion in order that the trick in the second part of the poem work.

Midway through the poem, the persona adjusts the focus by directly describing herself. The last half of the poem is placed entirely within parentheses. This part of the poem is not digression but insight into poem and persona. Her use of parentheses provides an ironic structure for the self-relevatory information contained within the remarks. The information within parentheses is qualified by what the persona says without parentheses. This move is problematic since the persona is drowned and in the photograph. If this is true, the persona must be hiding. The pseudo-innocence of the first part enables the persona to entrap the reader in the second part. She turns on the reader so that the focus becomes the disembodied voice of the persona. She has chosen the ultimate hiding place: a watery grave. She is beneath the surface of the poem as its subtext. The persona voices the poem from a locus of absence.

In the beginning of the poem, the persona's voice sounds matter-of-fact, sincere, and occasionally tentative in her descriptions. Then her tone of voice changes. The potential for incongruity increases the more that a reader initially believes the persona. While this does not automatically dictate a comic moment, it allows for the possibility. In the second half of the poem the persona seems covert, cool, and controlling. Her tone of voice may

reflect these attitudes by sounding sarcastic, hauty, and unexpectedly casual.

Responding with comic voicing emphasizes the ironic features of the poem. Likewise, irony is suggested by the inclusion of parentheses. The punctuation typically cues less important information. However, in this poem they contain the most essential features of persona and theme. The thematic challenge of perception is even more difficult with the juxtaposition of parenthetical and explicit remarks. The persona takes in the reader as she has been taken in. It seems as though the reader is made the butt of the persona's manipulations. However, it is the persona who emerges as the joke of the poem's double irony. The game of hide-and-seek encourages persona and audience to believe in the trustworthiness of appearances.

Other poems from The Circle Game collection allow a comic voicing, such as "Man With A Hook," "A Sybil," "Camera," "The Circle Game," and "Journey to the Interior." Some of these poems use parentheses to cue comic possibilities. While none of these poems seems as blatantly ironic and witty as that previously discussed, these poems include incongruous words, phrases, and imagery which may be heard as comic.

In a similiar manner, the following stanzas from "Eating Snake" help to illustrate how parentheses infuse comic potential into a poem.

> I too have taken the god into my mouth,
> chewed it up and tried not to choke on the bones.
> Rattlesnake it was, panfried
> and good too though a little oily.
>
> (Forget the phallic symbolism:
> two differences:
> snake tastes like chicken,
> and who ever credited the prick with wisdom?)
>
> . . .
>
> (Nevertheless, the authorities are agreed:
> God is round.)

This poem, from the recent Interlunar collection, represents one way that

parentheses shape the persona's voice. The persona may be heard as sincere and coy as she says the double-entendre introducing the first stanza. By the time the persona delivers her lines inside parentheses, she sounds sarcastic. The persona subtly takes in her reader only to trick them. She finishes the poem by drawing ironic and witty connections between the snake, as "otherness" and knowledge, temptation, sin, and phallic image, and God.[9] Textually, an irreverent persona melds sexual values and patriarchal religion. Responsively, a reader may accentuate these themes by phrasing parentheses with a comic touch.

Primarily, parentheses within Atwood's poems cue tag lines and idiosyncratic commentary. Rules of grammar would suggest that the enclosed information is somewhat less important than the body of the text. In Atwood, this rule is reversed. Parenthetical remarks inevitably provide the most essential imformation by and about the persona. Such a reversal results in irony.

Parentheses may be viewed as textual cues for comic responses.[10] They startle and ask a reader to pause and reassess the experience of the poem. Atwood uses parentheses as a primary means of cuing comic moments. It is through rehearsal that the reader, then, may improvise the translation of parentheses into voice. Typically, parentheses suggest various comic attitudes by the persona. Through Atwood's writings she may be heard as flip ("A Sybil"), condescending ("Two-Headed Poems"), self-deprecating ("First Neighbours"), sarcastic ("Heart Test With an Echo Chamber"), and/or overstated in her tone of voice ("Dreams of the Animals").

VOICING: READERLY RESPONSE FOR COMEDY

Parentheses provide one textual means of cueing possible comic moments. Additionally, the impulse toward comedy often occurs within the relationship between persona and theme. This relationship is occasionally difficult to describe. The reader is responsible for specifying indeterminate details of

this merger, such as voice. Through Atwood's canon there are many examples of incongruous, unexpected, and suprising voice to theme, such as in "Letters, Towards and Away," "One More Gardan," "Marrying the Hangman," "Circe/Mud Poems," and "True Romances." For the sake of convenience, I rely on the Power Politics volume to provide many of the upcoming illustrations.

In the Power Politics collection the theme of war between the sexes is depicted by a persona who describes the individual moments leading to the coming together and eventual crumbling of a relationship. Many of these poems are heightened by rehearsing them as comic. An impulse toward comedy may be heard in textual words, stanzas, and images as well as in the voicing of passages. In many of these poems, the persona's tone of voice can be rehearsed as wry, sarcastic, controlling, and witty. "They eat out" is perhaps the most discussed and criticized poem within the collection. Eli Mandel considers "in its play with role-playing [this poem] is both the wittiest and most revealing of the Power Politics sequence."[11] One way for a reader to respond to this poem is by relying on a comic voice:

> In restaurants we argue
> over which of us will pay for your funeral
>
> though the real question is
> whether or not I will make you immortal.
>
> At the moment only I
> can do it and so
>
> I raise the magic fork
> over the plate of beef fried rice
>
> and plunge it into your heart.
> There is a faint pop, a sizzle
>
> and through your own split head
> you rise up glowing:
>
> the ceiling opens
> a voice sings Love Is A Many
>
> Splendoured Thing
> you hang suspended above the city

in blue tights and a red cape,
your eyes flashing in unison.

The other diners regard you
some with awe, some only with boredom:

they cannot decide if you are a new weapon
or only a new advertisement.

As for me, I continue eating:
I liked you better the way you were,
but you were always ambitious.

This poem provides a number of potentially comic moments. The popular song title, lover as superman, and references to media advertising are colloquial and somewhat unexpected in the context of the poem. These images jump out and demand heightening by the persona's voice. Emotionally, the persona runs the gamut from sarcastic detachment to expansive hyperbole. Thematically, she undermines any notion of a twentieth century collective unconscious by attacking contemporary sexual assumptions embedded in North American culture.

The persona's voice reflects these gender dynamics throughout the poem. Comic instances are accentuated by relying on sarcasm and caricature rather than anger and sadness. The persona is in control of the situation. Specifically, a reader may try on sarcastic, disgusted, witty, acerbic, nonchalant, mocking, and wry or dryly humorous vocal qualities. This expanded use of voice results in an interpretation with many emotional and attitudinal layers.

Parody infuses a number of Atwood's poems, especially from this collection. In the opening stanzas from "He Reappears," the persona reflects a familiar Atwood theme, the parody of romantic convention.

You rose from a snowbank
with three heads, all
your hands were in your pockets

I said, haven't
I seen you somewhere before

In this, the persona casually describes an "other" who has "three heads." This is not a romantic knight in shining armour. Rather, the persona propositions the archetypal "bad man." Likewise, the unexpectedly colloquial expression in the second stanza sounds like a pick-up line more comfortable in a singles bar. She wants a man, even one with three heads. The popular adage "a way to a man's heart is through his stomach" fails the persona. She offers him "sandwiches and gingerale" but he refuses. The poem makes fun of stereotypical expectations of romance. These expectations, while spoken by the persona, are the romantic myths held by her readers. Trying on an overly casual, flippant tone of voice can accentuate comic elements. In this way, there is a greater incongruity between poetic theme and personal attitude.

In a similiar way, parody is introduced into the following excerpt from "There are better ways of doing this":

> It would be so good if you'd
> only stay up there
> where I put you, I could
> believe, you'd solve
> most of my religious problems

The knight is transformed from a three-headed monster into a saviour on a cross. The stereotype of an unblemished knight-errant is juxtaposed against realistic attitudes about romance. The persona craves a perfect lover, or at least someone in a powerful position that she can admire. In order to achieve this she envisions him as her rescurer. However, she is unable to deny his imperfect reality. He is not villain or saviour but simply a man. In order to heighten the parody in the poem, the persona may begin matter-of-factly and shift into a sarcastic and self-mocking tone by the stanza's end. While hardly a funny rehearsal, the suggested voicing allows comic incongruities to enter into the reader's experience of the persona.

"You take my hand and" provides some of the most dramatic and accessible images of the persona mocking love, as evident in the following stanzas:

You take my hand and
I'm suddenly in a bad movie,

. . .

We waltz in slow motion
through an air stale with aphorisms
we meet behind endless potted palms
you climb through the wrong windows

. . .

Have to face it I'm
finally an addict,
the smell of popcorn and worn plush
lingers for weeks

The love relationship is compared to a bad movie and romance is like climbing in the wrong window. The persona and her lover engage in a clandestine affair. Later she admits it is an unhealthy attachment when "I have to/ peel you off me/ in the form of smoke and melted/ celluoid." He clings like a second skin. By the end of the poem, the lover-as-addict simile is startling but expected within the context of the poem. The poem provides a dramatic glimpse of contemporary romance. The persona's voice may be rehearsed by inserting coy, seductive, wry, and self-deprecating nuances. She parodies society's romantic ideals and mocks her own assumptions about love and the male-female relationship. By relying on a comic voice, Atwood's themes and concerns about modern relationships are less strident and more likely to be heard by a reader.

Entrance to the Power Politics collection is provided by the following short poem:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

This poem foreshadows the sexual violence woven throughout the volume.

Likewise, the poem's cues allow layer upon layer of meaning. The speaker of this poem transforms common objects into shocking images of brutality. She alternately teases and tortures her reader.

The persona begins the poem by telling a story. She speaks to an unspecified "other" whom she refers to with the familiar pronoun "you." The persona is speaking about and, perhaps, to a man. Societal assumptions of heterosexuality suggest that the man has been or is the persona's male lover. Carol Benton suggests that gender choices for persona and this "other" reinforce

> the theme of war between the sexes. The fish hook, an object traditionally associated with men, brings new meaning to the idea of "sport fishing" when hooked into an open female eye. Also, the slang expression referring to women as "fish" and their genitalia as smelling like fish supports the male/female gender distinction.[12]

Halfway through the poem, there is blank space which may be translated into a pause by the reader. By the end of the poem, the persona harshly judges the relationship with "you." The pause in the middle reinforces the tension between the first and last lines of the poem. The persona uses the pause to shift the meaning of "hook" and "eye." The significance of the images is different in the first stanza than in the second. Through repetition, these images are transformed from innocent and safe to violent and deadly. The result is a brutal metaphorical rape of the persona's eye (sight) and I (person).

It is difficult to hear this poem as anything but terrorizing. One exception may be when a reader responds to this text in the context of the other poems in this volume. A comic response is not likely to be funny but may rely on incongruous or unexpected vocalizing to point up irony. The second stanza alters the meaning of the first. The "hook" and "eye" images

must shift in order for the persona's trick to work. The persona seduces and then tricks her reader. Ironically, a reader is not immune to the manipulations by the persona. The persona "hooks" her readers in their perceptual "eye." Their willingness to believe the persona allows the trick to take place. The persona has turned the tables on the reader. This scenario is hardly humorous but can work as highly ironic. Rate, pausing, and inflection mirror a cool, manipulating persona. Finally, while the poem does not necessarily support a "funny voice," it could be rehearsed with a vocal "smirk." The persona "puts one over" on her reader.

Other poems from the Power Politics collection which use parody, sarcasm, and/or irony to mock traditional romantic values include "She considers evading him," "You want to go back," "Their attitudes differ," "After all you are quite," "Small Tactics," and "You refuse to own." Each examines and excises gender conventions from their societal context.

The mocking of romantic conventions is a theme in many of Atwood's poems in other volumes of poetry. One blatantly comic example, "Tricks with Mirrors," is from You Are Happy. This five-part poem is uttered by a persona who adopts the role of a mirror reflecting the "other's" vane male attitudes. The poem combines themes of perception, reality, and gender dynamics. The following stanzas illustrate a sparse, deliberate language of the persona as she pokes fun at her lover:

> Mirrors
> are the perfect lovers,
>
> that's it, carry me up the stairs
> by the edges, don't drop me,
>
> that would be bad luck,
> throw me on the bed
>
> reflecting side up,
> fall into me,
>
> it will be your own
> mouth you hit, firm and glassy,

your own eyes you find you
are up against closed closed

. . .

I confess: this is not a mirror,
it is a door

I am trapped behind.
I wanted you to see me here,

say the releasing word, whatever
that may be, open the wall.

Instead you stand in front of me
combing your hair.

The female versus male dichotomy is emphasized in this poem. A reader may try on many voices for the persona in order to highlight her target of male narcissism. The persona conspiratorially shares views of her lover with readers. The "other" looking into the mirror strives to manipulate the persona. She, then, controls and distorts the manner in which she reflects him. She reminds him not to "assume it is passive/ or easy, this clarity/with which I give you yourself." The individual reader is, also, in a state of perpetually assessing what the persona is saying. Throughout the poem, the persona refers to herself as a mirror, a door, and a pool. These metaphors encourage a reader to help create a complex, prismatic persona. The reader sorts through images for a cohesive sense of textual meaning. A central concern of this poem is the way that each moment alters any previous moments. Time is ever-changing.

The persona's voice frames the emotional movement of this poem. She may rely on pauses and a calculated tone of voice in her presentation. It is likely that a reader may experiment with vocal rate in order to increase tension between persona and "other" and persona and reader. The impulse toward comedy occurs because of a juxtaposition between the controlling persona and her detached voice.

Finally, it is essential to remember that while a comic tone of voice may

be textually certain or probable, it is up to the individual reader to specify the exact way a voice sounds. Individual experiences, background, views, and beliefs influence the way and style in which a reader specifies a persona's voice. To illustrate, the following stanza from "The Saints" taken from the Interlunar collection may be vocally rehearsed in a few viable and interesting ways.

> The saints cannot distinguish
> between being with other people and being
> alone: another good reason for becoming one.

When reading this, the stanza is comic because the persona discusses the religious topic of sainthood in an unexpectedly conversational tone of voice. First, the persona's voice can be matter-of-fact throughout. This will point up an incongruous voice to theme. Second, the persona may be solemn, deliberate, and slow until the colon. After the colon she can abruptly switch to a flippant high-pitched voice. This will suprise and take-in the reader. Third, the voice can again begin in the deliberate manner described above. This time, after the colon, the persona can sound sly, sarcastic, and cutting. This will not only suprise the reader but give a sense of the persona's ridicule of the reader. In each instance, individual insights into poem and persona are highlighted by the reader's rehearsal. Each of these rehearsals is comic, and each comic moment reshapes the surrounding poem.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this article I have been interested in how comedy enters into selected Atwood poems and how these comic moments may sound. A reader's rehearsal may successfully illuminate unique features of a given text. In the present discussion, I have focused upon the individual way comic impulses reshape Atwood's texts. Texts explicitly demand a reassessment by a reader when structural elements such as parentheses are present. Likewise, a reader

may use rate, pitch, stress, and vocal tone as some of the means by which to highlight comic attitudes. Many of Atwood's poems allow the possibility of sounding sarcastic, manipulative, condescending, and witty.

Based on this discussion, there are three implications for Atwood's canon. First, there may be more similarities than prevoiusly noted between poetic and narrative texts. The two stylistic forms may not be thematically or structurally exclusive but may inform each other. For instance, the sarcastic, smirking, manipulative voice of many of Atwood's personae may be heard as similiar to the narrator of such novels as The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle. Second, Atwood's poetic works benefit from comic interpretations. Since the previous poems allow comic voicing, it is likely that another reader would find other poems which could support comic performances. The value of this expanded use of voice is that there are more ways for readers to enter Atwood's poetic texts. Third, a comic rendering of Atwood's poems alters and reshapes the voice of personae. She may sound sarcastic, witty and wry as well as angry, frustrated and hurt. As a result of this enlarged vocal dimension, the inclusion of comic impulses changes the relationship between text and reader. In sum, Atwood's poetic potential is enlarged rather than diminished by including a rehearsal of comic impulses. Her body of writing is enriched by providing a comic response to poetic texts.

NOTES

1

These early beginnings I am referring to include: Double Persephone, 1961, Atwood's first volume of poems, The Edible Woman, 1969, her first novel, and Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, 1972. For a current bibliography of Atwood's literary and critical contributions see, e.g., McCombs and Palmer.

2

See, e.g., Kanfer.

3

See, e.g., Benton, Comic Impulse, iv.

4

While other themes within Atwood's work have been discussed, such as the motif of duality (see, e.g., Grace, "Articulating"; Grace, Violent Duality; Grace and Weir), some of the most compelling criticism has been articulated on shamanistic and Native American influences (see, e.g., Woodcock; Mandel, "Atwood's Poetic Politics"), gothic and horror imagery (see, e.g., Harcourt; Glicksohn), and implicit and explicit feminist perspectives (see, e.g., Onley; Sullivan; Irvine; Juhasz).

5

Whereas many critics think that Atwood's "poetry, or much of it, is starkly humourless," (Fulford 96), some critics have been willing to mention selected examples of sarcasm, irony, and perverse humour (see, e.g., Rosenberg). Thompson addresses the comic taboo by saying that "[C]oncession to the comic doesn't blunt the terrors and exorcisms of much of Atwood's poetry; it simply acknowledges a major aspect often buried in assessments of her as an ice princess with a gorgon touch," (107-22 esp.,109). Finally, Wagner touches on the comedy inherent in the sexual politics within Atwood's Power Politics collection. In this "any woman's protective male is her handicap becomes a given, and the fun in the book comes through Atwood's myriad inventive descriptions of the power struggle," (88-89). Wagner does not explore humor throughout Atwood's canon, limiting herself, instead, to the innuendo and sly attack in this collection. Other than these brief comments, critics have not heard, or at least not addressed the possibility of comedy infusing Atwood's poetry. This omission led me to view reading as rehearsal as one evocative means of accessing comic impulses, this view reinforced through Benton's public performances (Selected Writings).

6

Benton has defined rehearsal as an imaginative and somatic readerly process. Further, she has suggested that reading as rehearsal "demands an active participation of a reader with the text, she or he becoming the necessary agent for lifting language off the page and making it sensuously, somatically alive." Specifically, the simile intends the "objective and subjective processes whereby a reader makes experimental choices and decisions about the text in an attempt to understand that text" and bring it to a temporary sense of realization, or final production (Comic Impulse 28). For a theoretical precedent for the act of reading as rehearsal Ingarden (see, e.g.Cognition; Literary Work; Selected Papers), Iser (see, e.g. Implied Reader; Act of Reading) and Poulet (53-68) provide elaboration.

[7] See, e.g., Benton, Comic Impulse, 26.

[8] See, e.g., Grace, "Introduction," 11.

[9] See, e.g., Hatch, "Poetry," 348-63.

[10] For uses of parentheses in Atwood, see, e.g., Benton, Comic Impulse, 126-134.

[11] See, e.g., Mandel, "Seedtime," 69-70.

[12] See, e.g., Benton, Comic Impulse, 62.

WORKS CITED

Atwood, Margaret. Double Persephone. Market Book Series, Book I. Toronto: Hawkshead, 1961.

---. The Circle Game. Toronto: Contact, 1966. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1967.

---. The Edible Woman. Boston: Little, Brown, 1969.

---. Power Politics. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971.

---. Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972.

---. You Are Happy. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

---. Interlunar. Toronto: Oxford U P, 1984.

Benton, Carol L. Raised Eyebrows: The Comic Impulse in the Poetry of Margaret Atwood. Diss. Southern Illinois U, 1988. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1989.

---, perf. Raised Eyebrows: Selected Writings by Margaret Atwood. Videocassette. Ferris State University, 1988. 65 min.

Davidson, Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson, eds. The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism. Toronto: Anansi, 1981.

Fulford, Robert. "The Images of Atwood." Sandler 95.

Glicksohn, Susan Wood. "The Martian Point of View." Extrapolation 15.2 (1974): 161-173.

Grace, Sherrill E. "Articulating the 'Space Between': Atwood's Untold Stories and Fresh Beginnings." Grace and Weir 1-16.

---. Introduction. The Circle Game. By Margaret Atwood. Toronto: Anansi, 1978, 9-15.

---. Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood. Montreal: Vehicule, 1980.

Grace, Sherrill E. and Lorraine Weir, eds. Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1983.

Harcourt, Joan. Rev. of Procedures for Underground. By Margaret Atwood. Quarry 20.1 (1971): 52-53.

Hatch, Ronald B. "Poetry." University of Toronto Quarterly 54.4 (Summer 1985): 348-63.

Ingarden, Roman. The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art. Trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson. Evanston: Northwestern U P, 1973.

---. The Literary Work of Art. Trans. George G. Grabowicz. Evanston:

Northwestern U P, 1973.

---. Selected Papers in Aesthetics. Ed. Peter J. McCormick. Washington: The Catholic U of America P, 1985.

Irvine, Lorna. "One Woman Leads to Another." Davidson and Davidson 95-106.

Iser, Wolfgang. The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1974.

---. [Akt des Lesens.] The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1978.

Juhasz, Suzanne. "Renunciation Transformed, the Dickinson Heritage: Emily Dickinson and Margaret Atwood." Women's Studies 12 (1986): 251-270.

Kanfer, Stefan. "Time Arrested." Time (6 February 1989): 70.

Mandel, Eli. "Seedtime in Dark May." Alphabet 4 (1962): 69-70.

---. "Atwood's Poetic Politics." Grace and Weir 53-66.

McCombs, Judith and Carole Palmer. Margaret Atwood: A Reference Guide. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989.

Onley, Gloria. "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle." Canadian Literature 60 (1974): 21-42.

Poulet, Georges. "Phenomenology of Reading." New Literary History 1.1 (Fall 1969): 53-68.

Rosenberg, Jerome H. Margaret Atwood. Toronto: Twayne's World Author Series, 1984.

Sandler, Linda, ed. Margaret Atwood: A Symposium. The Malahat Review 41 (January 1977). Victoria: U of Victoria, 1977.

Sullivan, Rosemary. "Breaking the Circle." Sandler 30-41.

Thompson, Lee Briscoe. "Minutes and Madness: Margaret Atwood's 'Dancing Girls.'" Davidson and Davidson 107-122.

Wagner, Linda. "The Making of 'Selected Poems,' the Process of Surfacing." Davidson and Davidson 81-94.

Woodcock, George. "Playing with Freezing Fire." Canadian Literature 70 (1976): 84-86.